

MY NILE BOAT.

My redoubtable one-eyed dragoman, Abool Hoosayn, an astute Cairene, is in the height of his enjoyment. I hear from the innermost cabin of that snug Nile boat, the “Isis” of 150 ardebs burden, the purring, soothing gurgle of his cocoa-nut narghilleh, or water pipe, through which he inhales the purified essence of the best Syrian tobacco, as with a sallow, thin, and rather vultury face, he sits cross-legged on his sacred canteen chest, and watches with stealthy craft the doings of our Arab crew.

We are ten days already out from Cairo, and our boat’s head is pointed to Thebes, the hundred-gated. It was sunset an hour ago; and that great orb of day slipped down into darkness in the space of exactly three minutes by my watch. Exactly two minutes after this remarkable but not unusual occurrence, my Nubian cook, Abdallah, prostrated himself on the deck in the Mussulman manner, and repeated his prayers; pressing his forehead to the well-worn planks. In three minutes after he was up and at me with a smoking tureen of orange-ocoloured lentil soup in his nimble hands.

But let me describe the Isis, her captain, and her eight sailors. The vessel is one of those known as a dahdbeyeh, such as are generally employed by voyagers on the Nile. It has a raised quarter-deck at one end, under which are the cabins, three in number; while the rest of the boat is low and flat, with a gunwale reaching no higher than one’s ankle. It has a small swallow-winged sail aft, and another larger one in the fore part, supported by the main mast, which is short and stumpy; just in front of this is a large square box full of earth and open at the top, which contains our ovens and fire-place. The crew’s cooking and coffee-making goes on in a small open chest, containing a large clay bowl full of fire. Here at most hours of the day you may see Achmed, the ship’s boy, making coffee, feeding the exhausted fire with short choppings of old rope, or breaking rye bread into a large wooden bowl, a leak in which has years ago been dexterously patched with tin.

It is pleasant now that Canopus shines with the brilliancy of a diamond on fire, and the wild geese fly creaking over our heads, piercing the solid dark in arrowy phalanxes, to hear the barking of the dogs of Beni Ammon, that sugar-growing village in the “crocodilyest” portion of the Ocean River. The sounds grow louder and louder; that is a sign we are near land, and are going to moor for the night, for the wind is puffing and stormy. I fear I must confess there are better places than the Nile to rest one’s bones on. “Chump-thump!” Do you! hear those dull sounds? The sailors are knocking in the mooring-stump, in the way the Egyptians have done for thousands of years — in fact, ever since the time of Joseph, or before. We are to glide past no more mounds of gourds today, no more acres of giant-bunched millet, no more groves of feathery palm, no more patches of leeks and onions, the grandchildren of those that fed the pyramid builders, no more miles of calcined cliff squared out into cellared tombs. Do you hear that rattling bang which sounds like premeditated assassination? That is the village watchman’s friendly greeting. He is in glee, he of the long silver-bound watch-lock, for the one-eyed dragoman will bestow on him fourpence-halfpenny for going to sleep all night on the bank near our boat, — a ceremony which is supposed to be effectual against thieves.

The great tawny swallows’ wings of sails are folded to rest; the huge glass lantern is duly hung outside our cabin; our candles are lit inside the enclosure where we sing, read, and discuss the events of the day; the lentil soup simmers over the fire, its lid jumps up and down as if in excitement and delight; the men shout “Allah! the great — the merciful!” and squat in a ring round the wide wooden bowl that steams under their grabbing brown fingers.

The captain — a solemn, black-bearded, and sullen man — collects himself into a heap in the head of the vessel, and sups in private after many ablutions. The brown waves may lip and wash below him, the heads of froth may float down, the great fish may blunder and tumble, — still he eats and smokes, indifferent to all natural phenomena; and, smoking, meditates after

the manner of the Moslem. Half an hour more and he will be a brown snoring bundle on the quarter-deck, happily wrapt in oblivion, for “sleep makes us all Pashas,” as the Bedouin proverb runs.

But, after all, I have not described the internal economy of the boat. It consists of three small low rooms: one of them is devoted to our small netted-in beds, and under them are provision cupboards, gunpowder, and other harmless trifles. The second is our sitting room; along each side of which are four small windows, and below them long cushioned seats, sacred to dozing, reading, and meditation. The third is our store-room; there our trunks and our wrappers are, our courier bags, our sacks of shot, our boxes of percussion caps, our warm coats and plaids for the cold nights and mornings, our sticks and umbrellas, our gun cleaners, our cases of wadding, our wine, our medicine chests, and other necessities and luxuries: for we want more than Adam wanted, now that the best of us have grown so sophisticated.

Of our bed-rooms little need be said, except that under each of our flinty pillows, which custom has rendered softer than the thrice-driven down, lurks nightly a revolver, — for the villagers about some parts of the river have a bad habit of visiting Nile boats, beating the passengers, and stripping the cabins; a loaded double barrel for wild duck rests against the wall. Nothing disturbs us at night but the perpetual noise of naval tactics, if we are under way; and if we are at rest, the barking of the village dogs, and the perpetual cough of Mohammed, the boy who sleeps outside the cabin under the deck, all among the eggs, cabbages, dates, and flour casks, where, as he tells me daily, he is much disturbed by the rats, who are as large as cats, and were certainly sent on board for the express torment of true believers.

Our sitting-room, which has yellow panels, is adorned with red and green cushions, red curtains, and green Venetian blinds; that old tarnished square-looking glass is as old as the childhood of Mohammed Ali, at least; the little

leather pillow-case that swings from the nail of the glass folding-door leading to the dressing cupboard is full of fine Syrian tobacco, and that black seal on it is the seal of some Damascus merchant.

At the door of our cabin is Abool Hoosayn's great canteen chest, containing a large plated soup-ladle, glasses, brass egg-cups, and Abool Hoosayn of the one eye, and that a very indifferent one, only knows what else. This box is his joy and pride: he rummages in it, he prowls about it, he lifts out trays, he lets the lid down on his chopped fingers; and when he is tired — and he is easily tired, is our dragoman — he sits on it cross-legged with a clumsy crooked chibouk, the meanest of all slaves that was ever made, like the gold demon in Eastern stories, to guard hoarded treasures, yes, there he sits and snaps at the noble captain. Near this chest at the one side are the stairs leading up to the quarter-deck, on the other is the square cage that contains the great filter, the water god of the vessel, beneath whose cool exudations repose the white pots of buffalo milk, the butter, and our tin can of goats' milk.

And talking of goats, that reminds me that half a kid hangs from the rigging, ready for tomorrow's dinner, cheek by jowl with a large bird-cage containing two cold fowls of a lean and ascetic conformation, some flaccid herbs, and some chocolate-coloured dates. In another cage on the quarter-deck are our oranges, limes, and pomegranates, near two rude sofas for our majesties' use, evening and morning. In a rude vermilion chest, inlaid with tawdry brass-work, and close to the fire-place, rest the crew's pipes, coffee-cups, and extra cloaks.

From the ambush of the cabin window, while we are dressing, my enthusiastic sporting friend Badger nearly every morning gets a shot at great pelicans, who with their aldermanic pouch come sailing along within reach. He seldom drops one but he gives me glowing accounts of how the shot splashed all over the vast creature, or how it fluttered in a peculiar manner to express surprise at the excellence of the noble sportsman's aim.

Not that Badger is a bad shot, but he fires at seldom less than two hundred yards' distance, and with shot three sizes too small; the consequence is, that he flurries wild geese, chips pieces out of crows' wings, staggers vultures, frightens cormorants, but brings little to the bag, though the Nile shores are lined with cranes, purple geese, pelicans, and herons, ranged as if drawn up to be drilled by the king of the birds.



As for our sailors, they are good-humoured drudges enough, but sad sluggish chattering, fussy old women in the hour of danger — if the Isis gets wound about in a whirlpool eddy, and the tow-rope breaks, or if sudden fierce blasts of wind were to come raging down from the Libyan Mountains or the Birds Hill. They are lean brown fellows, wearing, when on duty, little but long blue night-gowns and tawny felt skull-caps. Often I awake and see them up to their armpits in the Nile, putting their strong backs to ease us off a crocodile-haunted sand-bar; often I see them tie their gowns upon their head, and splashing in a quarter of a mile to shore, to take their turn at dragging at the sacred boat, the Isis, for a burning four hours' spell. Once round their supper bowl, beating the drum-head strained over the earthen

jar, or sounding the double pipe, and they are happy and free from care as children. Their chief peculiarity is their love of joking, and their extreme proclivity to sleep.

Their captain is a sullen stately man, in a red turban, and a coarse black cloak, who stalks with bare feet about the deck like an Othello, and whom, for the first three weeks, I honoured as a patriarch and a bora monarch of the Nile; but who, on a subsequent misunderstanding about a shirt of mine and a fishing line, never quite accounted for, sank sadly in my opinion, and whom subsequent lubberly hugging the shore, dread of darkness and fear of wind, have completely deposed from all claim to my admiration. Indeed, a pyramid of gold would never induce me to cross the Red Sea with such a captain. Yet to see him touch his breast, lips, and forehead, and with sullen bashfulness not unseemly murmur to me his morning salutations, you would think him Aaron of Rosetta, the commander of the Faithful himself; but then, after all, the Oriental lubber is, it must be confessed, a grander being than the lubber of our colder and less favoured clime.

The Reis shouts, commands “emsig” and “rooha,” and such hoarse guttural Arabic exhortations, but he does nothing else himself but occasionally pull the boat from the muddy bank in moments of emergency; and this he does with the regal condescension of a Sesostrius, though I daresay he would haggle for the last para in a bargain. Achmed, his second in command, is a fine handsome Misraimite. With jaunty green turban — for he is a descendant of the Prophet, and quite as great a rascal — he has sly half-shut black eyes, rather peering, from the habit of often looking at the sun in steering; crisp, shining black beard, and full liberal features; he holds the long helm with the dignity of a Ptolemy, but I have ceased to regard him with the respect of earlier days, since I find he sits down to steer, smokes his chibouk while at the helm, holds guttural discussions with the crew as to the whereabouts of the vessel, dozes while at his post, and breaks his fire-wood over his own head. He has a blameable tendency, too, of always bumping the vessel on land, just as we get into our first sleep.

But let me describe an average day in a Nile boat, say from near Gibbel Tayr or the Birds Hill to Minieh.

At about six o'clock, a noise as of a waggon load of firewood and a ton of rope being tumbled about the deck (which means, being interpreted, that some naval manoeuvre is taking place), awakes me and Badger, and we leap simultaneously out of bed like two unanimous harlequins. The boat is generally just on or just off a sand-bar. The crew are on shore towing, all in a row, with halters round their necks, as if they were prisoners of war doomed to the gallows, or are putting their brawny backs to it and heaving the Isis out of some difficulty, or they are swimming across a creek, or perhaps wading in the fat Nile mud up to their knees, or even a trifle higher.

A cry from Badger, who is struggling with a sliding window-shutter, makes me torn round. There is an enormous pelican, with big pouch parchments and flaccid, floating by gravely, a hundred yards or so off. Bang goes Badger's gun, tearing up the water with a scratching splash ten yards or so from the pompous emblem of charity, who gives a semicomical hop, and then flaps his great grey and white-tipped wings and is away; or, it maybe, there is a long, quivering cord of chattering wild geese that Badger scatters and utterly routs; or, perhaps, a little dark fleet of wild duck. You may be sure he always "stops" them, or "turns" them, or "knocks some feathers out," and they are as pleased as Badger; doubtless he hits them hard, but yet he does not bring them to bag. Badger loads again and is happy. Abool Hoosayn, the crafty dragoman, says, "too far upstairs;" by which he means that the birds were out of reach; at which Badger scoffs, curls the lip of pride, and puts on a copper cap on the blackened nipple of the gun, which is smoking like a little fairy chimney.

I look out then, hearing a grinding sound, and see the ship's boy grinding coffee, and the mate roasting some in a little frying-pan over the fire.

Gracious! how he grinds it in a small mortar, with a huge wooden pestle five feet long and thicker than a bed-post. No wonder the brown seeds crackle and crush helplessly under this tremendous instrument.

And the river, of what colour is it, and the bank, of what aspect? The great river, or “the ocean” as the Arabs call it, is of a muddy brown colour, holding perpetual mud in solution, but it washes past in pretty glittering waves this breezy morning, when the wind ruffles it. And the bank is now a green wave of sugar-canes — now a strip of desert sand— now a patch of millet — now a mile of acacia groves.

That mud fort is the village of Golosany, and those mud pillars are used for supporting the Arab water-raiser’s counterpoise. That intensely green strip of ribbon is clover; that endless black margin is Nile mud. Those half-naked brown men, with short and heavy shipwright adzes, are fellaheen, or peasants, hoeing up the ground for a new crop. Those net wigwams are hung up there by fishermen, and those big-headed fish, with long heads, are their finny spoil. Those long knotted purple batons the children carry on their shoulders, and which are three times as long as themselves, are ripe sugar-canes, which all young Egypt seems now to be munching, munching.

Here, too, broadside down the river, driven by three boughs instead of oars, comes one of the wonders of Egypt, read of by me in school-books so many long years ago. It is a square raft from Balass, and contains some thousand water-jars for the use of the women of Cairo; but why do I say water-jars? for these are huge amphorae. That one, stopped in the Roman manner with adhesive earth, will be used to hold oil, treacle, butter, rice, and other cohesive fluids and meltable solids. How bran-new from the potter’s fire they look, with their rough-green whiteness and their tinges of creamy white and red! They are bound together firmly with palm-cord, are packed neatly with dry palm-leaves, and are driven bravely down the current by the strong arms of those men of Balass, who strain at the branches which they use as oars. To fill those jars is the chief work of the blue-clad Egyptian

women in town or village.

Breakfast now. The smoking curry, the granular rice, the “mish-mish” or stewed apricots, the conserve of vegetable marrow, the oven-hatched eggs, the pomegranates, the buffalo’s milk-butter in flat cakes, are pleasant after the smart walk on deck— Badger’s gun is silent, and he is absorbed in the great and mysterious process of digestion. The meal safely over, we burn votive cigarettes in gratitude to its memory.

Then comes another stroll on deck, a shot at an ibis, a crack with a revolver at a hovering vulture or a sacred hawk. Then a long read aloud from Herodotus, who always knows more than he will tell, and who narrates such pleasant fables about the thief in the trap, and the helmet cup, and the sandal of Perseus, and the fair but indiscreet Rhodope, and the blind king, and the two pyramid builders, and other old friends of our boyhood; or we read the “Arabian Nights,” that some think were written in Egypt; with the six hundred thousand Israelites, we fly before the wrathful chariots of Pharaoh; we entangle ourselves in hieroglyphics, or knock our heads against the graven stone of Rosetta. Sometimes we forget ourselves pleasantly in a novel, or, growing tired of truth, we read history.

Fifteen miles of cliff already passed, calcined rock, vitreous barren stone, where nothing having life grows; carious bones of the old earth, mere honeycombed pumice-stone, with every gorge, deft, and hollow sifted up with drifted desert sand, fine as that which fills an hour-glass.

Do you see that mud wall, rising fort-like on the very edge of that tremendous precipice? That is the Copt convent of Mariam el Adra, or “Our Lady Mary the Virgin.” Those perilous perpendicular steps along the face of the rock lead down to the water.

Badger will fire to arouse the monks in their mud nest. Bang! go the twin barrels; a silence of two long seconds, then comes the bursting echo as of a

Cyclops hammer falling on the anvil. Instantly two or three dark figures, no larger than those in a Noah's ark, appear on the ramparted cliff; those are two Coptic brothers of our Lady Mary's convent. Lucky for us the wind is high and the water cold and stormy, or we should have those unclean men swimming off to us on swollen goat skins, and hear them screaming out —

“I also am a Christian, O Howagee. Alms, alms, O Howagee!”

No mud villages here, surrounded by white flocks of doves; no more bossy palm-trees tufted with leaves, as Arab lances are with ostrich feathers; no more egg ovens, or wavering green sugar-cane patches; no more tracts of bunched millet; but now miles of calcined cliff, honeycombed with square burial vaults, the doors of which look from here no larger than the doors of dog-kennels. No more lizard-haunted sands, or net wigwams of fishermen, but miles of rock graves,— dens where only the horned snake creeps, or the vulture stores its carrion.

Dinner is ready; a fizzing arises in the kitchen — sure sign of commencing sunset. A pretty-crested bird falls under Badger's terrible and far-resounding gun; a great glory burns out from the west; the eastern cliffs change from a pale dust colour to a luminous rose; the green cloudy grey shroud of the martyr day turns to burning gold.

The cloud-crocodiles, vapour-dragons, and misty monsters that point and gibber round the sunset are suddenly drawn into the whirlpool of flame, and shrivel away to shreds of glittering tinsel — rays from the rising orb fan upwards as from a martyr's crown.

A moment more and the eastern cliffs are ashy grey, the rich clouds have dropped like angels offerings into a martyr's grave. The sky is now of a ghostly green, melting into cold purple; the after-glow is upon us for a moment, the palm-trees are dark against it; then night drops like the portcullis of an Egyptian vault, and God speaks to us in starry hieroglyphics.

As Badger fires the dinner gun, Abool Hoosayn bears in in triumph a soup tureen, that smokes like an Arabian censer.

But what was that strange object that shone for a moment under the last gleam of sunset? I saw it on that long wet strip of ribby sand where the greedy pelican sat and sulked, because he could not keep his pouch perpetually full.

It was a ghastly creature, with scaly back, long and terrible jaws, and small, treacherous eyes. It shone as if it was coated with gold leaf, and it waddled back to the brown tide, honoured by a royal salute from Badger's double-barrel. That was the first crocodile we had seen, but it never came into Badger's bag.

Walter Thornbury.

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Once a Week, Jan. 20, 1866.]